

# COVID-19 pandemic and the gender divide at work and home

## Introduction

Gender inequality in many aspects of life is a well-documented reality.<sup>1</sup> Paid and unpaid work are both heavily gender-segregated, reflecting deep-rooted social norms about gender roles of women as primary caregivers. These divides translate into gaps in the labour market, pay and well-being, including in poverty and work–life conflict. The COVID-19 crisis has raised concerns about its potential to widen many gaps between women and men in the workplace and at home.

This report examines pre-pandemic patterns in gender inequalities in the EU in the domains of the labour market, unpaid work and well-being and looks at how they have been impacted during the recent COVID-19 crisis. It also analyses policy responses of national governments across the EU to address gender divides, and to prevent their widening during the pandemic. Finally, the report describes the outlook for gender inequalities in Europe. The future of equality between women and men will be shaped by factors such as gender segregation in labour markets, gender divides in telework and hybrid work, and gender mainstreaming in policymaking – especially in relation to caregiving and care services.

## Policy context

Gender equality is a core value of the European Union, and its promotion is enshrined in many EU-level strategies and policies. It has long been acknowledged that gender equality cannot be reached by treating it as a stand-alone goal, but needs to be incorporated into all policy areas (gender mainstreaming).

The Gender Equality Strategy for 2020–2025 and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), along with its Action Plan, focus on gender inequalities in multiple

dimensions through objectives and actions that foster gender mainstreaming and highlight the intersectional nature of inequalities. The importance of gender mainstreaming is recognised in the EU's funding instrument, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which requires explanations of how planned measures contribute to gender equality.

When it comes to gender inequalities in the labour market, several initiatives have been developed in recent years. These include the EPSR Action Plan with its target of halving the gender employment gap by 2030 and the Gender Equality Strategy which has guidance on how national tax and benefits systems can (dis)incentivise second earners. Both the proposed Pay Transparency Directive and the Directive on Minimum Wages have reducing the persistent gender pay gap as one of their main objectives. The European Parliament's resolution in favour of the right to disconnect from paid work outside working hours is particularly relevant to women, as they are overrepresented among teleworkers.

In terms of gender inequalities in the home, the Gender Equality Strategy recognises that these are substantial and are interlinked with those in the labour market. It places importance on addressing the gender care gap, for example, by providing pension credits for care-related career breaks. The EPSR sets minimum standards for parental, paternity and carer's leave, and presents options for flexible working arrangements under its Work–life Balance Initiative. The envisaged European Care Strategy is likely to include recommendations that are relevant to the well-being of informal and formal carers – a category in which women are disproportionately represented. Within the strategy, the revision of the Barcelona targets (to increase employment among parents of young children, especially women) aims to ensure further upward convergence among Member States concerning early childhood education and care.

<sup>1</sup> In this report, 'gender' is used to differentiate between people who identify as women and those who identify as men.

## Key findings

- In contrast to the Great Recession, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment rate, unemployment rate and hours worked has been remarkably gender-neutral at the aggregate EU level. However, employment losses have been concentrated among the lowest-paid women, while men's job losses have been more evenly distributed. Women are overrepresented in sectors such as hospitality which were closed down for long periods and experienced job losses; they are also overrepresented in teleworkable and essential sectors which had the fewest job losses.
- The pre-pandemic trend of women carrying out around twice the number of unpaid working hours of men continued, while the crisis increased the need for households themselves to provide services such as childcare and cleaning. Gender segregation in unpaid tasks deepened, with women's share of time-intensive tasks (such as caring, meal preparation and cleaning) increasing, while men's share of less time-demanding tasks (such as gardening, house repairs and transporting family members) also increased. As an exception, in dual-earner families where the mother did not telework, the share of childcare duties among teleworking fathers went up.
- Among employed individuals, women's total weekly working time (when paid and unpaid work are combined) exceeds that of men by 7 hours in the EU.
- Women are more likely than men to report a deterioration in their general health. Women have also experienced higher levels of depression, lower levels of optimism about the future, and higher rates of being at risk of poverty or social exclusion.
- Work-life conflicts have increased dramatically, particularly among teleworking mothers of young children, with 31% reporting that they 'always' or 'most of the time' found it difficult to concentrate on their jobs because of family responsibilities.
- Pandemic-period telework – often compulsory, rapidly implemented and combined with lack of care services – correlates with poor work-life balance and time poverty for parents who had to juggle paid work with homeschooling and care tasks. Regulations on flexible work arrangements and remote work should recognise that, when voluntary, these are most likely to be adopted by women.
- Working conditions in the care and human health sectors should be improved to guarantee adequate services of high quality. Examples of short-term pandemic-period policies in this direction include extra allowances for workers in elderly care (Germany), wage subsidies for childcare workers (Ireland) and mental health services for frontline workers (Ireland).
- During the pandemic, governments in countries like Luxembourg and Spain made amendments to parental leave policies, but this leave is predominantly taken up by mothers. Parental leave policies should include incentives for fathers to share childcare duties more equitably, for example by exclusively reserving a portion of (paid) leave for them. Besides the gender pay gap, gender norms play a significant role in fathers' decisions about taking parental leave. This emphasises the important role that company practices can play in encouraging fathers to take parental leave.
- Member States should support the provision of good-quality, accessible and affordable childcare services. The pandemic has emphasised how the provision of these services can support women's labour market participation, financial security and overall well-being.
- Gender balance should be ensured in all levels of decision-making, recognising that there is a two-way relationship between gender equality and public policy. The inclusion of women in policymaking leads to a virtuous cycle whereby more inclusive policies are debated and proposed.
- Post-pandemic recovery plans should explicitly address intersecting gender inequalities, underpinned by the gathering of gender-disaggregated data (including time-use surveys) that would lead to research-based policymaking and progress evaluation.

## Policy pointers

- Eligibility criteria for welfare benefits should extend to people who work part time and/or have breaks in their careers. As more women than men work part time and take career breaks, they are less likely to receive adequate benefits, contributing to gender gaps in poverty and social exclusion. The problem is particularly acute among single mothers, highlighting the importance of considering intersecting inequalities.

### Further information

The report *COVID-19 pandemic and the gender divide at work and home* is available at <http://eurofound.link/ef22010>

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